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When a Spider is Only a Spider

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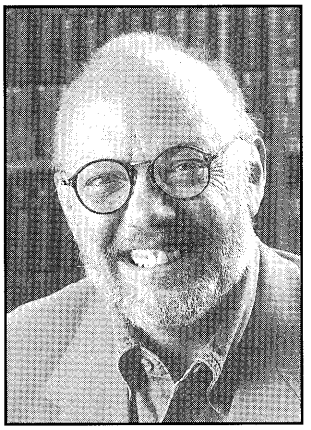

by James Calvin Schaap

Being real means touching on a universal humanity of shared experiences —joys and sorrows that are, regardless of gender or race, shared in the human story.

It's five in the morning, there's nothing moving in the house beside me and the cat, and I'm not even all that sure about me. I toss some coffee into the basket of our machine, close it up tightly, hit the "on" button, and reach for my toast, when I see him, a quarter-sized spider, who emerges shockingly from some unseen crack between the kitchen sink and counter top. I've never been susceptible to arachnophobia; my bones don't immediately chill. But I do wake up rather quickly, struck by the sudden and astonishing reality that the two of us—our cat and I—are not alone at this half-darkened hour in the kitchen.

Years ago, I remember taking my first close-up lens carefully from its box and affixing it to my camera, then going to the woods to take pictures of wild flowers. As I focused that lens and took in the view, I remember thinking that my new lens opened a whole new world to me, a world that had always existed in the soggy lakeshore forests where I grew up, but a world I'd never been privy to. So I shouldn't have been surprised to see that spider flex his gangly eight legs before me; I've known for years that what we see isn't the entire horizon. There are very real but unseen worlds even in our kitchen, worlds our cat likely knows far better than I.

So I wasn't deathly afraid of this impish insect, and neither was I shocked to know that, apparently, a spider had taken up residence somewhere beneath our sink. Yet, here I am, a half hour later, a floor away in the basement, telling multiple yous the story, in part, I think, because the event was considerably more stunning than the texture of my toast or the sound of percolating coffee. Put it this way: the story of the morning, so far, is undoubtedly the sudden and remarkable visit of the spider.

But why should I call his appearance a *visit*? Undoubtedly, he is as much a resident of this place as I am. (I've now assigned him a gender, likely reflecting both my prejudice and my age, not to mention the paucity of my scientific knowledge.) When other spiders ask him where he lives, he likely gives them the same address I do. My guess is he's not a

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recent immigrant; after all, it's summer and most beasts presently lurking outside our screens feel no particular urge to gain entrance to this house or any other at this time of year. His visit was likely not just a visit. The two of us just happened to cross paths. It's likely he was as shocked as I was—and his behavior, in fact, suggests as much. First, he crinkled those long legs and went into a stall, "playing 'possum'"; then, he shot off at a speed likely far beyond the posted limits of the blue highway between kitchen sink and window. In a flash he was gone. My coffee wasn't even perked.

I'm not sure why I'm saying all of this, really. Before I had opened the coffee this morning—before the spider and I had our moment—I was thinking about what I was going to say in this essay about realism, but it had nothing at all to do with a noiseless spider. Fortunately—or unfortunately—his appearance, or our mutual recognition, became the story. I suppose what happened in the kitchen, and what's happening as the letters emerge on the screen before me, as well as what's going on as your mind translates the inky shapes marching along in the line on this page, is what happens every time someone deliberately attempts to record very real human experience.

So this morning, I present for consideration my startling engagement with a resident spider. If I've entertained you at all so far, then I've already accomplished something of the first objective of good writing: I've kept your mind off the goings-on at the office, the crankiness of your joints, or the creeping jenny in the flower bed. "No great novel can be written about a flea," Melville once said, "but a great writer can make a flea take wing." This spider of ours—I'd like to think that you've already met him too.

If the spider incident has made you smile, I'd like to believe that your reaction is directly attributable to the quality of my writing, but I'm sure there's more to it. For a moment at least, I've tried to bring you directly into the Schaaps' kitchen; but it would be only half truth to say that world isn't already familiar to you, since my serendipitous meeting with a local spider may well have brought you back to similar meetings at your house. It's not simply my manipulation of the materials of the story that likely kept your attention; just as substantial to your interest is the very real possibility of your having experienced a similar early-morning face off. "Been there," people say, "done that."

But just for a moment, let's revisit the story by way of literature's three traditional ways of recording such incidents: romanticism, naturalism, and realism. Let me try to offer a textbook definition of realism before saying a few words in its defense. Here's the story.

Outside, night. Inside, man (or woman), half-asleep, brews a cup of coffee. Before his (or her) bleary eyes a spider emerges, sits still for a moment, then scuttles away. Man (or woman), startled, is no longer tired.

Rising action, complication, climax, denouement. All the rudimentary stuff is there. We've got ourselves a story.

If I were a textbook *romanticist*, someone given to interpreting the day-to-day and moment-to-moment events of our lives in the luminescent glow of a much higher reality, I'd likely tell the story not so much to entertain as to enlighten. Romanticism always seeks the higher light, and that's not difficult for someone like me, Sunday School trained to fer ret out gospel truth from God's own narrative, so that the story of Daniel becomes an object lesson for undergoing our own fiery trials.

In fact, a fine seventeenth-century Calvinist writer has already taken his turn with a spider. Edward Taylor, a New England Puritan prelate who may well have scratched out his poems the way some scribblers mark washroom walls, created something of a masterpiece out of the story of a wasp's final seconds in a spider's sticky web. The story Taylor tells in "Upon A Spider Catching A Fly" is a story of sheer malevolence, really. The wasp is webbed; the spider meanders over and, with its eight therapeutic fingers, gently calms its victim, lest the wasp, Taylor says, wreak havoc on his elaborate, sinewy snare. Then, once he's steadied his victim, the spider has lunch.

> Whereas the silly fly,
> Caught by its leg,
> Thou by the throat took'st hastily,
> And 'hind the head
> Bite dead.

Now Taylor's ample Calvinist psyche gave him little choice but to make additional meaning from what he'd seen. The spider, in the constellation of ideas and truths firmly ensconced in Taylor's mind, wasn't,

after all, simply a spider. Taylor saw much more to this spider's lunch than a spider's lunch.

"Thus," Taylor says, "this fray seems thus to us," and proceeds in the final stanzas to offer a conventional Puritan take on the events—as you can imagine, the Devil is the spider and we are the helpless wasp, although by virtue of our fallen character we're not exactly innocent; after all, we've wandered into the spider's sticky entrails ourselves. There is a Savior in the poem, of course, even though he didn't appear in the drama the poet witnessed. Taylor, reared undoubtedly on the *New England Primer*, romantically turns his spider story into a delightful, even unforgettable Sunday School lesson.

By *romanticism* here, I'm not referring to *romance*—wind-tossed ringlets of hair dangling over ample cleavage and pressed up against pecs to die for; what I mean is far less genre than propensity: the writer's desire to make meaning out of the things of our lives by using them to point toward ideas and ideals. To Taylor, the engagement of the spider and the wasp was important not simply because it happened, but because, for him, the event pointed unmistakably at the whole course of human experience as he saw it. Taylor's telling of my morning's spider tale would undoubtedly fashion God's truth out of the human experience of the scuttling spider.

Now romanticism and naturalism are hardly kissing cousins, even though they share more than they'd care to admit. *Naturalism* usually refers to a specific movement in nineteenth-century literature, something born, in part, out of Darwinian ideas and often defined as the application of the principles of scientific determinism to fiction. Naturally, I suppose, naturalists would disdain Taylor's lofty visions of the spider and the wasp, largely because they would prefer to draw their visions of reality from the netherworld of impulses human beings share with their animal ancestors.

Were an advocate of literary naturalism to write the saga of this morning's incident with the spider, he or she likely would have featured the bumbler, me, who really did nothing at all during the entire encounter, largely because in the face of such a phenomenon I was rendered numb and powerless. This spider, arising from the seamy underworld of loose-fitting cabinet joints, shocked me into momentary paralysis by forcing me to confront a something that was there, but a something I had considered tightly and safely controlled. For a moment at least, I was brought face to face with a spidery representation of that which I've tried to suppress (and I'm starting to sound like Freud).

I don't know a naturalist who's toyed with a spider, but it seems a propensity of most naturalist writers to toy with their subjects, whether human or not. For years I've used Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* with my students in an intro American novel course; almost to a person, they dislike him and his book, and the reason has less to do with the considerable length of the novel than Dreiser's intrusiveness. All writers are puppeteers after a fashion, but Dreiser forces the reader to note the strings he uses to manipulate character. My students growl at him because he's constantly telling the reader about his characters, explaining their actions and reactions, and generally treating the reader as patronizingly as he does George Hurstwood, or Carrie Meeber herself for that matter.

For both romanticism and naturalism, a spider is not just a spider.

I like *Sister Carrie* more than they do, but I understand their reactions. They stem from a weakness it is possible to attribute to most naturalist writers: in their supposed objectivity as scientific naturalists, they tend to stand so aloof above their poor and misguided characters that, at least by contemporary standards, we come to trust neither them nor the characters they create. And here's the irony: naturalists really aren't much different from romanticists. For although a naturalist's vision of truth comes from an entirely different world view than, say Edward Taylor, both Taylor's form of romanticism and Dreiser's form of naturalism are committed to a similar proposition—that a spider is not just a spider. For both, the characters and action of narrative tend to point toward another reality, although the realities lie in wholly different directions.

Enter, the realists. Realists, via the textbook, are those who give their undying support, not to

various visions or versions of our common experience but the experience of life itself. By definition, to realists, a spider is only a spider. For a realistic writer to render the story of this morning's encounter, there would be only one reason to tell the story: to narrate what happened. Realists—again, by definition—are those who seem most concerned with fidelity to the actual event.

So here's the story, *realistically*: I got up, put on the coffee, was suddenly shocked by the appearance of a spider emerging from somewhere I didn't see. He scurried off.

That's the story, the whole story.

Would that life were a textbook, but, just for a moment, (sorry about this) let's get real. Take Walt Whitman, another poet with spiders on his mind. Although he's always cast with his famous mid-nineteenth century compatriots (Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne) as part of the Romantic Movement, it's entirely possible to cast Whitman as a poetic realist; after all, his abiding principle was to create a new and vividly real American poetry by way of an entirely new poetic line, something more in tune, literally, with the cadences of American speech. Furthermore, he despised all adopted poetic conventions and forms, felt them entirely unsuitable to the glorious new culture emerging in the United States of America. His long catalog descriptions of American working men and women are as striking for their documentary style as they are for the measure of love and respect he brings to the telling. He intended to create a new voice, a poetic style that belonged to the people, something that isn't poetic pretense, but entirely and substantially real. Whitman wanted to get it right.

It's possible, in other words, to call Whitman a *realist.* In fact, I think he'd rather like the description. Now, have a look at the poem I've already alluded to, "A Noiseless, Patient Spider," in the hands of this realist, Whitman.

> A noiseless, patient spider
> I mark'd where on a little promontory
> it stood isolated,
> Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast
> surrounding,
> It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament,
> out of itself,
> Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

The first stanza includes the personal pronoun, so Whitman himself is not conspicuously absent; but the stanza is little more than a description of the spider. The second half of the poem moves toward much broader meaning:

> And you O my soul where you stand,
> Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans
> of space,
> Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,
> seeking the spheres to connect them
> Till the bridge you will need be form'd,
> till the ductile anchor hold,
> Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,
> O my soul.

Whitman's spider may be nothing but a spider, but the arachnid-ic observations he makes are the occasion for an idea that finally is greater than the spider itself. Thus, the realist, by textbook definition we've been establishing, is not a realist. His observations certainly wouldn't suit Edward Taylor's Puritan romanticism since they reveal much more of doubt than faith. A doctrinaire naturalist might be more comfortable with the poem, given that the author's revelation of his own loosened moorings suggests a human being very much unsure of himself. Nonetheless, to Whitman, in his most famous spider poem, a spider is not just a spider.

As I've said previously, I think it important to understand that *realism*, per se, is far less a genre than it is a propensity. If realism, as a genre, were to be viable, there would be no need for the imagination. How about this?—click on a tape, capture the dialogue of a mid-afternoon tea, type it up, and submit it for publication. That kind of realism—slavish commitment to reality—will almost always fail by way of its own banality. It's been tried, I'm sure, but such attempts at literal realism have little appeal for anyone other than the speakers whose voices register.

Even documentary films require editing. As I write, the hottest television programs of the season are what some call "reality TV." Put a dozen people into a blender and turn on the camera. But even those shows require editing, the conscious attempt to shape materials so that focus and timing and narrative drive create viewer interest.

Murder confessions can make good stories, but it's unlikely that a murderer's confession alone will ever make great literature. Anyone who's ever picked up a pen knows that each word she chooses emerges from a process of selection. Any writer who believes that fidelity to life in certain situations simply requires a trainload of vulgarity and profanity is

ignoring the truth of the writing process—specifically, that we choose each word we write. That doesn't mean, of course, that vulgarity and profanity can not be the language of story. It only means, *realistically*, that we transcribe nothing at all in the writing process. We choose.

Strictly speaking then, realism, as a genre, does not exist—or if it does, it exists largely as experiment. That doesn't mean, however, that there are not realistic propensities in writing. The name most frequently associated with literary realism may well be that of novelist Honoré de Balzac, who, for the sake of realism, made it his mission to record endless details of his French culture, yet fashioned plots that often aren't particularly believable, overflowing as they do with sensational conspiracies and coincidences. In his case, fidelity to actuality ended, perhaps, with the details.

However, whenever a writer strives for fidelity to actuality in human experience, there exists something of the realistic impulse. That impulse is very much in evidence, for instance, in the young Kate Chopin, whose early stories of the bayou ("Caline," "A Visit to Avoyelles," and "Madame Celestine's Divorce" are examples) clearly suggest the themes of her masterwork, *The Awakening*, but seem far more concerned with their Louisiana settings than theme, documenting as they do the exotic flavors of a Creole culture into which she was adopted when she married her husband and moved to New Orleans. In those early stories, it's debatable, I suppose, whether her penchant for local color comes from her reading experience or what seems her wide-eyed fascination with exotic new neighborhoods. What seems obvious, however, is that she wanted her bayou stories to be as attentive to exacting detail as some pre-Raphaelite painter might have been. She was being "real."

Yet something else altogether happened in the writing of *The Awakening*, her classic novel about the emotional isolation of a woman in that same Creole society. This is the way she explained it in *Book News*, July, 1899 in response to her many (and angry) critics:

> Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing, I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over, and it was then too late.

The Awakening features the same attention to Creole culture that characterizes her early stories. Long reveries of the lives of famously rich French Louisianians seem, early on in the novel, almost too much for the narrative to carry. It's evident that in the novel, as in those early stories, Kate Chopin wants to be exactingly accurate to time and place.

But the strength of Kate Chopin's realism in *The Awakening* transcended anything she'd done before, because with Edna Pontellier—if we believe her own description of the writing of the novel—she stumbled onto realities readers ever since have found strikingly accurate, something that emerges not specifically from the local color, but from the desperation of her protagonist, Edna Pontellier. The realism of *The Awakening* is, of course, psychological realism, fidelity to the actuality of what readers themselves feel, by way of their own experience, to be true. The novel is known to readers around the world, not because it features Creole high society, but because Edna Pontellier's situation and her reactions to that situation somehow resonate with the lives and the imagined lives of many thousands of readers. The novel's power and popularity emerge from its being psychologically real.

Realism is far less a genre than it is a propensity.

The propensity for realism in Kate Chopin, when combined with a writing process that was exploratory rather than declarative—it wandered rather than drew a bead on some preordained conclusion—resulted, by way of her imaginative talents, in a novel whose power has far outlasted those bayou short stories as well as many other novels far more popular than hers at the turn of the twentieth century. It seems obvious to say it, but realism, the desire to achieve fidelity to the actuality of life itself, can achieve great things when it touches upon what Faulkner called "the verities of the human heart," desires, impulses, situations, choices that we all feel and face and make, but not often without some memorable hesitation and/or anxiety. We are all remarkably alike when it comes to some of those very basic

human decisions, the kind that cost us. I've often told my writing students that an odd paradox emerges from the evaluation of good writing—that which is most personal is, strangely enough, most universal.

Being real means touching on a universal humanity in particular experiences—joys and sorrows that are, regardless of gender or race, shared in the human story. Any writer is most real when what she writes comes off the page, not just as vividly imagined narrative but as something at least a cousin to what readers themselves have, at least in part, realized or experienced. Substantial, powerful, and edifying literature offers myriad virtues, but not the least of them is an imaginative grid by which the rest of us, by our associations, come to understand not only ourselves but also our world even better. Great literature succeeds, at least in part, because we know it to be true on the basis of our own lives, our own human experience.

That, presently, we live in a time when the belief in such a communion of human spirits is eschewed goes without saying. Theoretically, of course, the ruling hegemony would have us believe that there is no such thing as shared human experience since we all are segmented, somewhat like grapefruit chunks, within the sour rind of human experience.

Maybe. But maybe not. Years ago, I was blessed with an unusual student in an introduction to college writing class—a fifty-something, Cuban-American woman, whose thinning hair was colored a deeply burnished mahogany as dramatic as her eye-liner. She was unique, of course, among the many 19-year-old Milwaukee-area students in class, kids whose names, like their faces, often carried the traces of their own Polish or German backgrounds. What's more, she was a refugee, having escaped Cuba in her thirties.

When it came time to assign the narrative essay, I anticipated reading her assignment, sure that it would spin a yarn unlike any other I would read. When that essay came in, however, I learned a lesson. The story she wanted to tell had nothing to do with Cuba, or communism, or political repression. It was about sitting on a beach (presumably, but not revealed as Cuba) where she watched her children play in the surf. In other words, it was about motherhood. In other words, it was about parenthood. In other words, it was about caring for one's own.

I have no doubt that she could have spun the kind of exotic tale I expected, but instead she chose to tell a story about watching her children and worrying about what they might be. All of that could have happened right there on Lake Michigan.

Post-modernists may theorize as they'd like, but I believe certain songs play in all of our hearts and souls, songs that arise from longings and hurts, joys and concerns that belong to all of us in the human family. All of us worry about those we love. For that matter, all of us have encountered a spider when we really weren't expecting it.

We recognize the realistic impulse, I believe, when we recognize ourselves in narrative or exposition. That old definition may be vague, but it is certainly not off base: realism is fidelity to the actuality of human experience.

A story: A year ago, when teaching an Elderhostel program, I read a poem by Stanley Wiersma titled "Last Visit in Three Voices," in which the narrator tells the story of his aged father's death. The audience that morning was sizeable and attentive, not one of them all that much younger than the aged father in the poem.

"Last Visit" is a delicate poem, with much to savor, much to invoke tears. But when, sometime later, the class was dismissed, one of the senior citizens just had to tell me something. He wasn't alone, but he waited patiently until the others had made their comments. Finally, up front, he pointed at me, straight in the eye, a big smile on his face, as if he'd been richly blessed. "I like tomatoes sliced on bread with sugar," he said, winking. Then he walked away.

That's all he wanted me to know. That's what he waited twenty minutes to share, and I honestly had no idea what he meant.

Later, I looked at the text once again. The old man is complaining about hospital food: ". . .they cut tomatoes into wedges for salads,. . .I like tomatoes sliced on bread with sugar." That's what the poem says.

And that's exactly what he told me: "I like tomatoes sliced on bread with sugar." He wasn't commenting on the poem's themes or implications; he wasn't saying a word about the old man's life; what he wanted to tell me had nothing to do with death or the trauma of grief for those left behind. All he wanted me to know is that when he heard that one particular line, the slot machine in his mind went

"bing, bing, bing" and turned up a straight line of tomato sandwich icons. That poem had made a connection, even if it may not have been the connection the poet was trying to create. One feels the realistic impulse, I believe, when the reader somehow understands that the story or its ingredients authenticate what he or she knows to be true.

One of my most treasured reviews came from a farmer in rural Minnesota who had just heard me read a story in the fellowship hall of his church, a story about a hog farmer and his wife surviving a blizzard. That he liked what he'd heard was evident in the almost stunned look on his face as he reached for my hand. "You know, Mr. Schaap," he said, "you write about real people." That's all he said, but I understood he meant it as the most generous compliment he could muster. And I knew why. That retired farmer had found a hook in my story from which he could hang his own seed cap. In the fiction, he really did "experience" the story, in part because he could so easily identify his own experience in it. Somewhere through the narrative, almost shockingly, he'd come to feel he was hearing his own story.

For the realistic writer, that kind of discovery on the part of the reader is not only a joy but an attribute of the work. Such close identification helps the reader ease into the willing suspension of disbelief and thereby, I believe, experience one of the grandest blessings of story—the opportunity to find their own human selves, as John Gardner would say, in "the narrative dream," the tale itself.

Less than a month ago, as I write, the entire literary world broke forth in great rejoicing over the publication of the fourth installment of the Harry Potter saga, a novel whose almost four million sales a week after publication made it an international event. What's remarkable, of course, is that most of those sales were to kids whom brilliant cultural observers long ago assumed had abandoned reading altogether for the assorted pleasures of the cathode-ray tube. I know a young lady who received the nearly 750-page novel as a gift, read it completely, late into the night, then proceeded to read it again.

It goes without saying that none of the Harry Potter books are realism, *per se*; they are of another genre altogether, something we've come to call "fantasy." In the community of writers in which I operate, the world of writers and readers who are Christian believers, for the most part realism is often defined by what it's not; simply stated, it's not fantasy. None of us, after all, live in a world of hobbits (J. R. R. Tolkien), none of us really knows what goes on in the hearts of whales (Robert Siegel), and no one I know has ever witnessed, first-hand, the cosmic battles of a barnyard (Walt Wangerin). Nonetheless, add up the readers of the heretofore mentioned, throw in the myriad additional devotees of C. S. Lewis, Madeline L'Engle, Steven R. Lawhead, and a host of others, and one can account for a goodly number of Christian bookstore sales slips in the last several decades.

Tell you what. Let's experiment with the narrative

We recognize the realistic impulse when we recognize ourselves in the story.

that began my morning. Our protagonist, bleary-eyed, rises with the sun, puts on the coffee, and suddenly notices a spider emerge from some unknown spot in the geography of his kitchen. The spider, shocked by the grotesque, human monster in front of him, feigns death. Then, obviously unsuccessful and with nowhere to turn, he begs for grace. "Schaap," he says to me, "I've just lost my wife and children in the storm."

Guess what? We're off on a tale.

Far be it from me to forswear fantasy as some kind of lesser narrative art than realism. In the first place, there is no question that, in order to achieve storytelling's necessary ends I'd have to create that spider's grief with such fidelity to the actuality of human experience that the reader would, in a moment, totally abandon his skepticism about grief-stricken arachnids. I'd have to use every weapon in my realistic arsenal to create the same degree of identification tomatoes-and-sugar-on-toast achieved with the man who discovered his own experience in the poem I read. Simply enough, I'd have to spin a terrific yarn about the humanity of spiders. What I'm saying is, fantasy won't succeed without realism.

So let's put this rumor to sleep. The requirements for achievement in the field of literature—whether fantasy or realism—are much the same: both require some of the attention implied by that old word,

verisimilitude, a word my little dictionary defines simply as "the appearance or semblance of truth." Readers must somehow identify with questing hobbits or heroic roosters before the flea can take wing. Fantasy requires realism.

That having been said, however, there is more to say. For differences exist, of course, between fantasy and realism, in the limited way we are now discussing differences. While the conveyance to an imagined world is likely much the same (verisimilitude), and the end is undoubtedly similar (to tell a whoppin' good story), the givens of fantasy and realism are drawn from different worlds. Fantasy, usually, is set where none of us have been; realism, often enough, grows from worlds we all have known—or will.

To ask which is better is as silly as to wonder about which is most "Christian," if we can use that word as an adjective at all. From my point of view, the propensity toward realism is likely a predilection. I find myself agreeing with Flannery O'Conner, who used to say that we can choose what we'd like to write, but we can't choose what we can write well. Perhaps it's the Calvinist in me, but I too believe in a kind of foreordination here. Some of us are simply drawn to fantasy, some to realism. Some of us love to create worlds where spiders grieve; some of us rather prefer our fictional grief to be human. Which is the better fruit—apples or oranges?

Years ago, I remember my son's fascination with Tolkien. I'm not sure how often he read *The Hobbit*, but I began to think that with a few more rounds at the dog-eared pages of the edition I bought him, he could simply put it on the shelf and tell the story by heart. Anyway, in the middle of that phase of his reading life, he once asked me why I didn't write things like *The Hobbit*. After observing his tenacious reading, I wondered myself.

The only answer I could come up with was this: rather like Bartleby, I prefered not to. There was no good reason, other than the fact that writing about hobbits, like reading about them, simply didn't interest me. I never had a Tolkien or Lewis or L'Engle phase in my life. My interest in literature, without a doubt, arose from my reading of a very realistic novel by a writer named Frederic Manfred, a man who lived right down the road from where I attended college (and where I teach today). In a little-known novel titled *The Secret Place*, he brought me directly into a world I knew very well, a Dutch Reformed world, so that, at eighteen years old, I found tomatoes-and-sugar-on-toast. I suppose, one might say, I've been a victim of the limitations of that experience ever since.

But if that's true, I can live with it, because to me spiders are interesting in and of themselves—and so are our stunned reactions to their untimely appearances. I've always been far more interested in the here and now than in yesterday or tomorrow or some meticulously fashioned time warp.

So, for better or for worse, how does this penchant for realism really work? Let me, once again, tell you a story.

Years ago, somewhere in the rural American South, a young preacher introduced his all-white Baptist church to the possibility of racial integration when a black family began to attend. Integration, at that time, was something touted only by a renegade preacher named Martin Luther King; it wasn't something sought by most white Southerners. This young preacher, however, was idealistic; and when the church membership of that black family became a question for congregational approval, he told the people in his church that if they voted no, he had no reason to continue in their pulpit, for every last tenet of the gospel would be denied by their prejudice, by what he likely thought of as their sinful hate. His speech, a man who witnessed it told me, was unforgettable.

The congregation voted. The African-American family was denied membership.

Life is almost always more complex than we'd like it to be. By way of negotiation and heart-felt appeal, that preacher ended up staying at the church who'd rejected his prophetic witness. He stayed and continued to work slowly toward the change he couldn't affect in the first confrontation.

Now the man who told me this story lost track of him and the church, but years later he heard that the young pastor, no longer so young certainly, and likely not as idealistic as once might have been, ended his own life. That young pastor whom my friend had admired so much throughout his life for his courageous stand, killed himself.

I suppose I am and forever will be a realist, in part because I'm made that way; but more so, I believe, because the stories of this world are, to me at least,

far more fascinating than the stories of some other. Why, I ask myself, would this man, this courageous, religious man, this man who looked in the face of sin and pleaded for righteousness, this man who was so right about what he saw and felt around—why would this man eventually kill himself? What could lead that man to the despair that leads to utter hopelessness?

The journalist in me would love to cull through the story of the man's life, to sift through its exacting details for suggestions and hints from his nature and his nurture to understand that horrific despair.

Yet, the realistic fiction writer in me would rather turn his back on the verifiable facts, and just imagine. What I'd like to do with that story—if I were the one to write it—is discover for myself what might have happened by undertaking a relentless pursuit of the elements I do know—powerful faith, gutsy character, and a penchant for peace-making. I'd like to answer for myself, imaginatively, what can make a man, a believer, fall, finally, to dire hopelessness. The realistic fiction writer in me would like to write that novel, if for no other reason than to pursue something I find very mysterious—and make sense of it. I suppose I could do that same investigation with red squirrels who give up hope, with defeated plow horses, or some species of beings created in my imagination. But I'd much prefer the feel of real life—not only to tell the story, but to read it myself.

What keeps me from writing that novel? Oddly enough, realism. I am well aware that the best of writers are entirely capable of moving into arenas far from their own experience; that, for instance, *Sophie's Choice*, with some prudent editing, could well be the finest novel of the Holocaust, despite the fact that William Styron is neither a survivor nor Jewish. I know the great writers can move from setting to setting without missing a beat.

So maybe it's fear on my part, but I wouldn't write that Southern novel the way the story was told because I don't believe a Midwesterner could handle the realistic givens pre-requisite to making the story take wing. My telling it would make me look like the carpet-bagger I'd be. Were I to try such a story, I'd almost certainly attempt to remove it from its setting in the American South. I'd have to create a powerfully difficult issue for some small-town Protestant preacher in the upper Midwest, an issue over which he, or she, would have taken up Jeremiah's hectoring, because—realistically—the racial conflict simply would not play as well in rural Wisconsin as it would in rural Alabama. I'd have to set the story here, where I know not only how people think but how the late afternoon sky looks as it opens reassuringly after a storm. In order to pursue the mystery of that story, I have to believe I can, first of all, achieve fidelity to actuality of time and place.

To a writer, what are the advantages of that kind of realism? I'm not sure there are any, actually. Harry Potter and Stephen King make it painfully clear to someone like me that much of the reading public often prefers other worlds in its reading. And, as I said, it would be difficult to argue that any more or less can be accomplished in story telling by way of the kind of realism I find myself bound to.

To me, spiders are interesting in and of themselves.

Should a census be taken, I am quite sure there would be more fantasy than realistic writers among believers who are novelists. Why? In part, I'm sure, sheer escape, arguably the most important ingredient in story-telling of any kind ("once upon a time. . ."). Fantasy offers escape more readily and more fully, I believe.

Second, at least among Christian readers there is already an existing interest in and allegiance to another world than the one we inhabit, not only a fascination with John's Isle of Patmos dream sequences, but also a distaste for and even a fear of the perils of this world of flesh and sin. Fantasy offers a template for a world view already in place in many believers' minds, while realism only drops us back into this world that we, by some theologies, spend a lifetime escaping. "This world is not my own," we used to sing; "I'm just a passin' through." For some reason at least, writing about this world may well remind believing readers of a world they would rather forget or shun.

It may be of more than passing interest that, among those writers who've come from the Dutch Calvinist or Dutch Reformed tradition, none dallied very long, if at all, with the fantasy genre. Frederic Manfred, Peter DeVries, Hugh Cook, Stanley Wiersma, Jim

Heynen—all of them have created stories set *here*, in this world and not some other. A glance at the fiction shelves in any Christian bookstore will quickly reveal, however, that an abundance of evangelical Christian writers, following in the tradition of George MacDonald, through C. S. Lewis and Madeline L'Engle, prefer locating their stories in others—worlds more imaginative, fanciful. It would be hasty to create a generalization here, but one can't help but wonder whether the scope of one's worldview might have something to say about the manner by which believers envision what we see, in fact, all around us.

I don't for a minute believe that writing in one genre is, in any sense, easier than the other. However, the responsibilities of realism lead us toward the known, as opposed to the only imagined. In the real world, most men or women who smack their fingers with hammers say words that some Christians don't like. A purely imagined world may offer freer playgrounds because fantasy's opportunities for sheer speculation are certainly more bountiful. We all know, in a way, this world; we can only dream of others.

All of which is not to say that fantasy writers keep us away from life's dark corners. They don't. Nonetheless, for a reader, despair may be easier to take in a hobbit than in a young preacher who, in a well-told story, comes painfully to resemble some revered relative.

But there's one more side road we need to take here, and once again it's Flannery O'Connor who points directions. "People without hope," she said, "don't write novels." What she meant, I believe, is quite simple. The arduous work of creating life by way of words—whether it's fantasy or realism or anything else—is a task undertaken because the writer wants badly to gather the sometimes disparate strands of our lives together into narrative structure that has a beginning and an end. Writers—all of them—try to make sense of life itself, even if, like Poe, for instance, they see human madness as divinest sense.

And for that reason, we're all a family, finally—all of us writers and readers. What we're after is order and meaning and some semblance of truth. A bearded man cusses out a flight attendant; a woman we know finds something real and strong in a heart she'd given up on; we stand in a place where the sun shines only when it moves between towering office buildings: every writer I know attempts to juggle an exotic mixture of images and anecdotes, of sights and smells and tastes, in order to make some sense out of the life we're in. And discovering meaning, O'Conner suggests, is not a job undertaken by the hopeless.

In anything but real life, a spider, really, is never just a spider.

So what do we make of this morning's confrontation? I'm a realist; I think he's worth it, all by himself, without hanging some additional transcendent thematic baggage on his surprise emergence or his speedy getaway. But I'm also a story-teller and something of a liar. If you've stayed with me this long, you've spent a hundred times longer reading about him than he spent aboveboard on our kitchen counter. I'd like to tell you that, to me, a realist, a spider is only a spider, but his sudden appearance this morning has been the very real occasion for all kinds of fantasy.

Whatever. Somewhere beneath the sink right now, this eight-legged intruder is likely sitting in a barber chair, a circle of friends around him, telling them, in vivid detail, of his morning meeting with a monster. I hope it's entertaining. I bet it is—and I bet it makes sense.

I say, let him make of me what he will. More power to him.